

CONDUCTING A PHYSICAL INVENTORY OF RECORDS

Adapted from Local Records Information Leaflet No. 24 New York State Archives and Records Administration

Introduction

The first step in establishing a records management program should be a physical inventory of your records. This inventory will tell you what type of records you have, what the volume of the records is, and where and how are they kept. With this information, one can begin to create a records retention schedule.

However, the inventory can be used to do more than prepare a retention schedule. When used correctly, the inventory will serve as the foundation for an entire records management program. Areas where the inventory can assist include:

- ***Inactive records storage*** — the inventory will tell you the volume of inactive records your department or agency has and the rate of records growth. With this information, you will know how much storage space your department or agency will need for the present and for the future.
- ***Microfilm*** — the inventory will tell you which records are good candidates for microfilming and the volume of the records. This information will help you determine the costs of filming and whether to film in-house or through a service bureau.
- ***Archives*** — the inventory will identify the archival records your department or agency has, their location, and their condition.
- ***Files management*** — knowing the volume and reference rate of active records will help you determine filing equipment needs and the best system of filing records.

Part II. Who should perform the inventory?

Responsibility for seeing that the inventory is completed rests with your designated records manager. However, your records manager does not necessarily have to be the individual who does the inventory. This can be done by a member of the records manager's staff, by one or more employees

of each sub-division of the department or agency, by an individual hired specifically to conduct the inventory, or by a student intern or volunteer.

Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of assigning inventory work to current staff members:

- The office staff is familiar with the office's records, the information they contain, and the purpose of the records.
- Access to any confidential records is limited to permanent staff.

Disadvantages include:

- The staff already has assigned duties and many of them can't take the additional time to do the inventory.
- Even if they have time, they may resent being assigned additional work. Quality may suffer if these employees respond by hurrying through the inventory.

Because staff members are familiar with the records, they may assume the records manager is equally familiar with them. As a result, they may use jargon or abbreviations that mean nothing outside their own office. This can be a serious problem when each office or subdivision inventories its own records.

Whoever conducts the inventory should be thoroughly trained in how to complete the inventory. The inventory's usefulness as a planning tool depends on complete and accurate information.

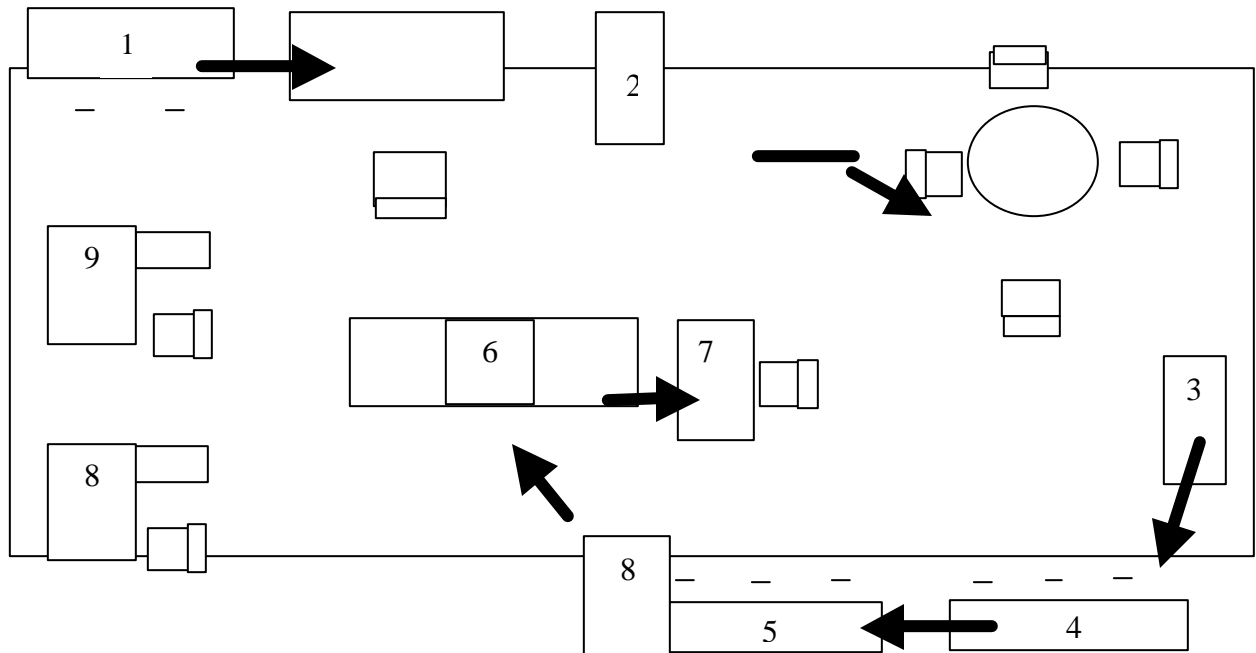
The Inventory Form

After deciding who will do the inventory, the records manager will have to decide what inventory sheet will be used. This is an important consideration. The inventory sheet should be easy to fill out, provide enough information to be useful, and, once completed, easy for the records manager to understand. The inventory should provide space for the record title, location, quantity, date span, purpose, and description of the information contained in the record. ***Also at the SHRAB website <http://www2.state.id.us/ishs/SHRAB.html> is the inventory form to be used. Photocopy as often as needed.***

Part III. Planning the Inventory

Once the decision to conduct the inventory has been made, and the inventory worker(s) chosen and trained, plans for conducting the inventory should be

made before the actual work begins. It is important that the inventory be conducted in a systematic manner (see figure below). Unless all of the offices or subdivisions are doing their own inventories, subdivisions should be done one at a time. **The inventory worker should determine which office or subdivision will be inventoried first, and complete it before moving on to the next office.**



The inventory should be conducted in a systematic manner.

To assist the inventory worker(s), he or she should be provided with an organizational chart. This will show all of the various subdivisions of the department or agency and their relationship to each other. With this information, the inventory worker can be sure to inventory all offices and can decide in what order they should be done.

Factors that can determine the inventory order include:

- The volume of records;
- The importance of the office in the department or agency structure;
- The level of support for the records management program; and,
- Whether any office has a critical space problem.

Conducting the Inventory

The inventory worker should begin by visiting the supervisor of the office being inventoried. If the inventory worker does not know the supervisor, he or she should introduce himself or herself. The supervisor should be aware of the inventory project, if not, the inventory worker should explain what he or she is doing and why.

Three points should be made clear in this discussion:

- The inventory worker must have access to all of the records;
- The inventory worker will have to ask the staff questions, but he or she will try to keep such questions at a minimum;
- The purpose of the inventory is to identify the records of the office, not to criticize the way the files are kept.

Where are the records? The inventory worker should then ask to be shown the location of all the office's records. The inventory worker should note these locations and begin mentally planning the order in which he or she will conduct the inventory. If staff members do not know the inventory worker, this is a good time to be introduced to them.

Active office is first. Always begin in the active office area before inventorying storage areas. The records in the active office will be better organized and the relationship between record series will be easier to see. In addition, if the inventory workers run into problems, there will be staff members at hand to provide assistance.

Records in Storage are next. If the office has its own storage facility, then it should be inventoried after the office records have been completed. If the office shares a communal record storage facility, then all of the offices' active records should be inventoried before moving on to the storage area. As many storage facilities are poorly organized, it will be much easier if the inventory worker is already familiar with the records when inventorying the inactive records.

Be Systematic. The records should be inventoried in a systematic manner, beginning at one part of the room and proceeding in a logical manner. One file cabinet should be completed before moving on to the next. A systematic procedure will decrease the chances of overlooking any records. This is particularly important if the inventory worker is inventorying part time.

Look at the records! Open every file drawer and box. Do not assume that

the label on the box or file cabinet is accurate. The original records may have been taken out of the box or file drawer without the label being changed. When taking records out of a drawer or box, the inventory worker should carefully mark the location and put the records exactly where he or she got them.

Record Series. The inventory worker should complete one inventory sheet per record series per location. A record series is a group of documents or file units arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they relate to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, have a particular form, or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation. More simply, a record series is a group of records that are filed as a unit, maintained as a unit, and usually disposed of as a unit.

Even if the inventory worker knows that there are additional records in another location, he or she should complete the inventory for the current location. An additional worksheet should be filled out for the additional records. For example, the inventory worker may find that there are purchase orders for 1996-1999 in the active office. Even if the inventory worker knows that there are purchase orders for 1994-1996 in the basement, he or she should complete the inventory sheet for the office and later prepare a separate worksheet for the records in the basement. Not only is this easier for the inventory worker, it will also ensure that the inventory sheet can be used to locate the records at a later date.

Abbreviations should be avoided. This is particularly important if the inventory worker is a temporary employee or volunteer who will not be available later to interpret the abbreviations. Even if the records manager is performing the inventory, he or she may not be able to decipher his or her own abbreviations weeks later.

Inventory all of the department or agency's records. Only in this way can the records manager get an accurate picture of the records situation.

However, while all records should be inventoried, two items should not:

- **Publications originating *outside* the department or agency.** These include magazines, federal or state guidelines or regulations, books, pamphlets and other related material. **These items are reference material, not records, and are not subject to records retention and disposition**

schedules. The only exceptions to this rule are publications originated by the department or agency. These might include a history of the department or agency, newsletters and similar publications. These have potential archival value and should be included in the inventory.

- **Blank forms.** These are supplies, not records. They do not become records until they are filled in.

Conclusion

Because of the inventory's importance, the records manager should carefully plan how it will be done. Staff members can do it or an inventory worker can be hired for that specific purpose. One person can be assigned to inventory all the records or several individuals can be assigned specific groups of records. However the inventory is done, the goal should be to secure complete and accurate information. **A good inventory will be a solid foundation for a good records management program; a poorly done inventory will set the stage for a poor records management program.**

Remember: If you have any questions while conducting this inventory, feel free to contact State Archivist Steve Walker any time at (208) 334-2620 or by e-mail at: swalker@ishs.state.id.us